PROGRESSIVE
December 1985



# War of Attrition

## Washington turns the screws on the Sandinistas

BY ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Invasion, war of attrition, negotiation. Those are the three options the Reagan Administration has in Nicaragua. But since negotiation does not suit the Administration's style, it is seriously considering only the other two alternatives, which share the same objective: getting rid of the Sandinistas.

"There's a faction that wants to invade and another that thinks invasion is unwise," says Bill LeoGrande, a staff member of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. "But it isn't one department versus another; it cuts across departments and agencies." Battle lines are drawn between the advocates of invasion, who look for a symbolic "rollback" of the Soviet empire and a spectacular demonstration of American military prowess, versus the proponents of a war of attrition, who seek the slow strangulation of the Sandinistas.

"The result of the disagreement is that nothing happens," says LeoGrande. "It's a rut. Some want to push the policy out to the right, some want to push it to the left. But neither side can do it. So the policy stays where it is and keeps going forward. The policy is the synthesis of their disagreement."

Here are the major players:

Fred C. Ikle, Under Secretary for Policy at the Department of Defense, is the Pentagon's principal hawk, while the Joint Chiefs of Staff, still twinging from Vietnam, counsel caution. On the eve of his retirement in June, General Wallace H. Nutting, commander of Army and Air Force combat forces in the United States, strongly expressed his opposition to invasion and went so far as to suggest "that we are going to have to learn to live with Nicaragua."

Such diffidence has carried the day, at least so far. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger "usually follows the uniform guys," LeoGrande observes.

At the National Security Council, the President's national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, generally argues against invasion. But at the CIA, Director William Casey and other gung-ho types appear eager to send the troops in.

CIA analysts, however, recognize the many pitfalls of an invasion: another Vietnam-like quagmire, an explosive reaction in Latin America, the destabilization of many of its governments, and strong opposition here at home.

The State Department is thought to be the most dovish, although Secretary of State George Shultz plays his cards close to the vest. Rumors persist that Langhorne Motley, former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, left his post last June because he favored negotiations with the Sandinistas. His successor, Elliott Abrams, has a reputation as a hard-liner.

At the distant fringe of the debate, an occasional voice suggests a deal with the six-year-old Sandinista regime: all Soviet and Cuban military advisers out of Nicaragua, a reduction in the Nicaraguan military, U.S. guarantees of Nicaraguan sovereignty, a "Finlandization" solution. But that is a voice in the wilderness.

Administration policy has meant continued funding for the *contras*, economic embargo, pressure on private and multilateral banks to limit loans, pressure on allied governments that try to maintain normal relations with the Sandinista government, travel bans, and the prospect of breaking diplomatic relations. This policy of attrition aims to turn the screws so tightly that the Nicaraguan government will run out of resources, its people will rise up in frustration, the leaders of the revolution will turn against each other in fratricidal recrimination, and the Sandinistas will be squeezed dry and lifeless at the feet of the Yankee giant.

The policy is working. Mounting internal discontent has already led the Sandinista government to declare a state of emergency. In announcing the suspension of civil liberties in mid-October, President Daniel Ortega blamed U.S. meddling.

"To support the terrorist policy of the American leaders," Ortega said, "allies and agents of imperialism who act from some political parties, press outlets, or religious institutions, are stepping up their actions to sabotage national defense efforts, hinder our economic policies, and provoke discontent and confusion in the popular bases."

To some extent, U.S. policy toward Nicaragua results not so much from stalemate as from the gradual victory of a particular position.

"There is a new strategy at work in Nicaragua and Central America: low-intensity war," says Deborah Barry, an American analyst of U.S. foreign policy who lives in Nicaragua and works as a research fellow with the Regional Coordinating Council for Economic and Social Studies. "It's what was learned from Vietnam. It's not about gun-boats and invasions. It's a major shift from the concept of conventional warfare."

The doctrine of low-intensity war, Barry argues, refines the counterinsurgency theories of the Vietnam era. Its advocates are found in all of the national security agencies of the U.S. Government, though it is still little understood in the lesser bureau-

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cracy and in the political community at large.

"The objective is not, as in conventional war, to eliminate your enemy and seize territory," says Barry. "The objectives of the war are moved onto a political plane: to render your enemy politically useless."

Political and social campaigns become as important as the military front. "The battlefield," says Barry, "is against the insurgents or radical government, using guerrilla and 'resistance' soldiers; with the civilian population, winning their hearts and minds; pressuring foreign governments and organizations, like the Socialist International, and convincing American and world public opinion through manipulation of the media." As Barry sees it, it is a total and integrated conception of war.

To render the enemy "politically useless," the principal task must be to separate the population from the revolutionary government. "Their idea is that there always is a small group which is hoodwinking the masses," says Barry. "In Nicaragua, the war must prevent the Sandinista government from delivering on the promises of the revolution. It tears at the veins and the arteries of the economy and internationally it blocks access to international financing, trade, and aid."

In the United States, the battle for public opinion is all-important to Administration strategy. It plays up Nicaragua's mistakes and appropriates the language of the revolution, Barry notes. Justice, peace, democracy, dialogue—these become goals of the *contras*, according to Washington's propaganda. Even the word "revolution" itself is turned against the Sandinistas, as the *contras* claim to be the rightful bearers of the revolutionary banner.

"Manipulation of the media agenda is essential, and simplicity and repetition the secret to success," says Barry. "New ideas are combated with old, simple, and familiar ones." Careful attention is paid to present the enemy in increasingly strident terms. The Reagan Administration gradually escalates the rhetoric about the Sandinistas from "untrustworthy" to "Soviet-Cuban surrogate" to "Marxist-Leninist" to "terrorist."

Still, the threat of an outright invasion hovers as an everyday presence. After an initial reluctance, the Pentagon now says it can take control of 60 per cent of Nicaraguan territory in two weeks. And the Reagan Administration's recent string of foreign policy victories has weakened domestic opposition to the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government—as well as to other military adventures around the world.

The most recent polls on Nicaragua, taken in June before the House of Representatives voted $27 million in aid to the *contras*, continue to show decided disagreement with the U.S. policy of helping to overthrow the Sandinistas: 53 per cent still oppose it, a figure that has remained approximately the same since June 1983. But the polls show an ominous shift that reflects the partial success of the Administration's media campaign to paint the Sandinistas as "evil" and "communists": Those favoring U.S. assistance in toppling the Managua regime have increased from 23 per cent to 32 per cent over the past two years. Even more disquieting is the fact that the Administration seems to be steadily winning converts to its cause.

"The ideological climate is changing," says Debra Reuben, coordinator of the Nicaragua Network. "At the grass-roots level, when you go out to talk about Nicaragua, the barriers, the questions, come much sooner. There is less willingness to listen."

Most Americans, however, remain ignorant of U.S. policy. Only one out of every four persons polled in June knew the United States was backing the *contras*. "It doesn't intrude into their daily life," says LeoGrande. "It doesn't even touch it."

For all the problems facing the anti-interventionist movement, the number of people committed to opposing U.S. policy in Nicaragua "has skyrocketed," says Reuben. She points to the 70,000 persons who have signed the Pledge of Resistance, a church-inspired campaign that enlists people to perform civil disobedience in the event of U.S. escalation of the existing war or the invasion of Nicaragua. Some 40,000 Americans have gone to Nicaragua since 1979, Reuben estimates, including leaders from trade union, minority, artistic, and citizen groups.

"New sectors are getting involved," says Reuben, "and people are digging in for a long-term struggle."

Under what circumstances would the United States invade? "MIGs could provoke a full-scale invasion," says LeoGrande, echoing Congressional warnings that the acquisition of sophisticated weaponry by Managua would entail serious risks.

But it might not even take such a misstep by the Sandinistas to loose the dogs. If the government of Nicaragua were to show signs of serious divisions, says LeoGrande, then "a pretext" would be all that is needed.

Neither LeoGrande nor Reuben expects an invasion, however. Instead, they assume the war of attrition will simply continue. It has taken its toll already. Up to 50 per cent of Nicaragua's national budget already goes to support the war effort. And 12,000 Nicaraguans have died so far in the *contra* war, President Ortega told *The New York Times* in July. The first national conscription in Nicaraguan history has been confronted by considerable resistance.

The embargo which the Reagan Administration imposed in May has meant that all U.S. imports—from toothpaste to sanitary napkins to drinking glasses—are either in short supply and prohibitively expensive or just don't exist. Distribution problems bring periodic shortages; shortages mean long lines. The price of basic goods has been driven up by inflation, and life is hard.

This low-profile war also wears away at its opposition in the United States. "Everybody is sick and tired of Nicaragua," one Congressional observer told me. "The liberals are fed up. It's an irritant. They don't like to vote on unpopular things. And the Administration won't leave it alone. They keep bringing it back and bringing it back. Congress and the liberals beat the Administration three times; the Administration beat them once, and that's all that it needed to walk away with victory."

The grass-roots opposition complains of being overloaded. "There are too many crises too often," Reuben laments. "Your educational campaigns suffer; your humanitarian aid campaigns and sister-city projects get put aside." The feeling is one of perpetual siege, "and with the shift in the ideological climate, we expect more harassment from the Government."

For Deborah Barry and her associates in the Caribbean and Central America, more than Reagan's good luck is at work. "It's a new strategic conception, prolonged counterrevolutionary war," she says. "It is the result of the reinterpretation of Vietnam and the experience of the Third World liberation struggles of the last forty years. And it's not just Nicaragua. It's El Salvador. It's the whole Third World."

The question that both the Nicaraguan government and U.S. critics of Reagan policy have to answer is how to deal not with an invasion but with this enervating, constant war. ■